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AUTHOR Phillips, Jerry
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ABSTRACT

A new "remedial" or marginal group has emerged in teacher certification, known in Texas as Alternate Certification. In the Texas program, university graduates earn a certificate upon completion of a rigid state-mandated program. A group of 25 graduate students and their teacher set out to examine their notions of literacy, its institutions, and to enhance their power and authority in the classroom. These non-traditional students (most with master's degrees but not from education schools) initially resisted a critical approach to learning but soon surrendered their resistance. They explored ways of writing using an oral interview writer's workshop model in which students selected, interviewed, and tape-recorded literacy life experiences of an older adult. Using the oral interviews as an instrument of learning, the students turned their findings into written narratives on literacy. Students kept a personal journal and produced a written analysis of their writing. What the students did in the workshop led them to seize ownership of their writing. Individual writers became individual owners of their writing. A new writing perspective emerged for these students. (RS)

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A Recipe for Reclaiming Ownership: The Oral History Narrative

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Jerry Phillips

Graduate Student
Texas Woman's University
Department of Reading
Denton, TX 76024

P. O. Box 708
Chico, TX 76030
(817-644-5573

CS212588

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A Recipe for Reclaiming Ownership:
The Oral History Narrative

A new "remedial" or marginal group has emerged in professional teacher certification, known in Texas as Alternate Certification. In the Texas program, university graduates earn a certificate upon completion of a rigid state mandated program. Many Texas educators see this group as one solution to teacher shortage; others see it as a stigma on the profession. This program suggests the state does not intend to share ownership of literacy learning. Yet as a teacher-agent of the state, I have the responsibility to foster personal and social ownership in established and prospective teachers. In so doing, I try to help teachers and, in turn, their future students internalize and effect their personal and social usefulness.

A year ago, I set out to help twenty-five graduate students certify their stake in teaching and simultaneously become more literacy proficient. I intended to examine with them their notions of literacy, its institutions, and enhance their power and authority in the classroom. Several students held masters degrees, yet none graduated from colleges of education. They all wanted to be teachers. Selected by a Texas urban school, these students represented its first group to seek certification via the alternate route.

This paper deals with the teacher's role, the student's role, and how together they create a personalized curriculum. During the first days of class these non-traditional students

expected a traditional classroom lecture approach to learning: the teacher talks, students take notes, and teacher gives tests. I consider this a boring, inefficient way to teach and learn, and so informed them. Surprised, they resisted suggestions for a critical approach to learning, in that, they brought their agenda.

The Students' Agenda

Certification rated first on their agenda. They wanted instruction on how successfully to transcend a major standardized certification examination. They were impatient with my critical approach, yet understood I was in charge. Soon, another important item dominated their agenda. The class met in a conference room, originally set aside for regular faculty leisure activities. The first week, some members of the faculty expressed resentment over our use of their comfort area. These remarks, made in the presence of the students, immediately signaled resentment among the student. This resentment had a direct, cleansing effect on the students, setting them apart from the regular facility. Now, as a marginalized group, different became better in their eyes.

Surrendering their resistance, they jumped to my side of the fence to the "greener pastures" of a critical approach to learning. Comfortable in their subjectivity, they gripped my extended hand of power.

The Teacher's Agenda

The task of helping graduate students write, and

simultaneously, think for themselves as writers is difficult. The students changing perspective on critical instruction enabled me to establish non-conventional class requirements. We began to explore ways of writing through Wigginton's (1987) oral-interview writer's workshop model. My expectation was that the students would internalize the teaching of writing as a learning tool to help themselves, and their future students.

To link the teaching of writing and critical thinking through language interaction, this model suggests that students select, interview, and tape-record literacy life experiences of another person. After discussion, the students selected individuals from the older adult community. Typically, older adults are more readily available for interviews because they do not have the time constraints that working or going to school impose. I agreed to the students' decision.

The story form is familiar to both parties involved in the interview/writing process. What makes up the stories, the circumstances, sketches, strifes and characters, becomes familiar to the writer and to those who read the narratives. The use of others' lives allows the interviewer/writer to define literacy in a real yet decentered way. The interviewer and their subject participate in mutual teaching and learning. Because little research on older adult literacy exists, this agenda allows the students to use language and social activity between two people to produce meaning. Thus, theoretically, a

new literacy perspective emerges.

My critical learning agenda centered first on the students' lives, then moved into the lives of the interview subjects. Because I wanted to understand and internalize their ways of writing, the student's subjective thoughts on writing were the last item on my agenda. I held particular interest in how they used writing in their assignments, their process, strategies and their ways of gathering information to prepare for writing. Further, I wanted to comprehend their feelings about co-writers reading and critiquing their writing.

The students were to produce a final written report of the oral interviews. Together, we decided to bind the narratives in book form on the last day of class. Each student would receive a copy, and I promised to display a copy where the public might read it.

Agenda Resistance

Because I wanted the students to control their writing, I did not try to control how they managed their writing. Yet, they demanded instruction and demonstrations, asking, "Is this what you want?", and several statements before the interviews signaled a fear of the writing process, "This writing stuff is hard work."

The first resistance preceded the oral interviews. The students hesitated to do oral interview work without demonstrations. They were reluctant to interview older adults without a preset package of interview questions. To negotiate their need for direction and my desire for noninvasive

control, we grouped, brainstormed and produced a list of collective questions.

Following the interviews, the students further challenged me to produce a common set of instructions to help them write their oral interview reports. I prepared the following handout with instructions to use as needed.

Step One

Listen to the tapes three times, make and add to notes during and after each playback. Do not make a transcript. Read all notes one time and put them away overnight.

Step Two

Before taking out notes, take time to brainstorm by writing everything you remember about the interview. Put these notes with transcript notes. Take a break. Concentrate on the interviewee and write down everything you remember about your subject. Do not use the notes. Put these new notes with all other notes. Take another break. Following the break, make a rough outline from memory. Do not use notes. Put outline with all other notes. Take a third break.

Step Three

Take pen, word processor, pencil, or typewriter and write as fast as possible. Leave a large left hand margin on your paper. Freewrite. Do not use notes or outline. Do not worry about writing mechanics. Just write. When you run out of words, put with all other notes and outline. Take a break. Read all notes, outline, freewriting. Use large left hand margin for notes, corrections, whatever you would like to add.

Set down at typewriter and again start writing. Do not worry about format. Do not look at notes. When you run out of words, stop. Take a break. Refer to notes, outline, previous drafts. Repeat until you have nothing left to say. Get out all your notes, outline and drafts. Put them in one pile. Take typed sheets (rough drafts) and put in another pile. Take another break. Read your typed sheets. Refer to notes, outline. Listen to tape again. Start editing, use wide left margin. On a new sheet correct margin. Try to write your first decent piece.

Step Four

Bring rough draft to class. Read it to someone. Listen to someone else's rough draft. Interact with another writer. Make personal notes and write suggestions that appeal to you. Give your listener what they give to you.

Step Five

Bring final draft to class. Show it to someone. Correct final draft. Prepare it for your audience.

Using the oral interview as an instrument of learning, these students turned their findings into written narratives on literacy. In this context, they controlled their destiny by determining the social role of the workshop through their authority and direction. They negotiated what it all meant with other writers through sharing their writing.

Gathering the Data

Next, I list and discuss the three data sources gathered during the writer's workshop. (1) The students' personal

journal. (2) their written analysis of their writing, and (3) their final writing product: a book of narratives. I do so in contexts recommended by four skilled in the field of descriptive writing research. Graves (1983) reasons that, in any writing activity, there should be satisfaction of the writers own learning, the joy and surprise of finding out what they have to say. Perl & Wilson (1986) suggests that we watch and document students making decisions, connections, and mistakes. Then, Van Maanen (1988) teaches us to write our findings in a way others can understand them.

At this point, my role, as defined by Bogdan & Biklen (1982), shifted from instructor to that of participant observer. They received my instructions, then demanded more details. Next, they collaborated with co-writers before "hitting the streets." Then, they were on their own, first to gather information from the older adults, and then to bring it back to show others. I allowed the students to do the work, then sat back, attentive, and let them decide the direction. Yet I was available daily to receive and share, when asked, their ways of learning. The more these students made decisions about what they were doing, the more motivated they were to continue their efforts. And, the more they would write and search for their emerging writing voice.

1. The personal journal

I recommended the students compose their thoughts about writing, and the workshop, in a personal journal. Every student responded to this suggestion. Yet, again, they

demanded rules and demonstrations. I found these requirements within reach, and decreed, "Do not worry about doing it right. There are no rules to follow. The journal is your book, it is impossible to go wrong." Daily then, the students reflected on previous events and personal experiences, both in and away from the classroom.

2. The Narrative Collection

I recently participated in such a collaboration on the university level with both teachers and prospective teachers (King, 1989). I have also conducted a similar workshop with adult writers in a non-academic setting. In both instances, the teacher-leader gave initial guidance, but then allowed the writers to take over. When the students returned to the classroom with their rough drafts ready to share with co-writers, they took over the workshop.

In the end, all students, dissatisfied with their final product, caved in to their deadline in time to put the book together. They collaborated, but did not attend to the mechanics of putting the book together. They decided to share the cost and hire a printer to construct it.

With the collection of narratives written, bound, and distributed, the students were ready to reflect on and analyze, in writing, their progress.

3. Students' Self Analysis

Writing is an instrument to think with, a symbolic tool for articulation of ideas. Using that tool, the students did not so much send their thoughts in pursuit of words as use

words to pursue their thoughts. Therefore, my final agenda item gave them an opportunity to reflect and make meaning from writing experiences. Attending to these reflexive questions helps students lay to rest two inhibiting preconceptions about writing. One that it aims solely at communication, and two, that it needs to be perfect and complete.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, I used a six step process grounded in Glaser and Strauss' (1967) qualitative inductive analysis. I subjectively attempted to acknowledge that categories do not conscientiously exist in vacuum, waiting for discovery, and proceeded. First, I read the data several times, searching in particular for what students had to say concerning writing. Then, I made rough personal notes pursuing categories. Second, I used mapping techniques to internalize existing categories, build understanding, and allow additional categories to emerge. Third, I used clustering and connections to refine the emerging categories. Fourth, I freewrote to eliminate written garbage to bridge findings with a reader. Fifth, after writing several rough drafts of this paper, an adult from a nonacademic setting edited and made advisement. Sixth, I shared the final draft with two members of the class who made comments and suggestions.

Discussing the Categories

There are many ways to interpret data. This section addresses the emergent categories that made sense to me in terms of these students, their power, and control.

In the journals, the students could not go wrong. Yet, writing a personal journal helped them change their writing perspective. I offer Boris and Timothy's entries to augment.

> "Writing in my journal has become quite pleasurable. I've found out a lot of interesting things about myself."

> "This journal has helped to develop a strength I didn't know I had. I am now able to express myself in writing as well as verbally."

Composing models for evolving writers suggest that those, like these students, unfamiliar with writing, profit from writing about themselves and their strengths. This allows for ownership of the writing and the learning it creates. Owned writing develops a sense of voice or empowerment in the writing process. Thus, these two students engaged in initial attempts at writings to find their places on the developmental continuum, in that, they benefited from writing subjectively about themselves.

Subjective writing may help us celebrate new understandings about ourselves. In Susan's case, the thread of celebration emerged over a short period in her entries. She wrote early in concerning a special type of resistance.

> "I've heard that people who don't write much have a hard time writing. Maybe that is why I don't like to write. On the other hand, maybe forcing myself to write in this journal will pull me out of my sleepy attitude about writing."

The comment "forcing myself to write" signals a subjective willingness to analyze personally the ways to clear the "block" barrier. Susan's later writing clarifies this insight.

> "Writing gives me an emotional high. Before this class, I never thought I could write like I can now. That is not to say I'm an exceptional writer, but I'm a better one. Just a few weeks ago, if anyone had asked me, I would have honestly said that I could not write a thing."

Susan, through writing, enriches herself with personal power. Yet, Alice writes about another type of transition.

> "Since I was a little girl, writing is something I always wanted to do, but I thought I never had the talent for it. Being able to write a story and see it in print is really exciting."

In these few sentences, Alice possibly reawakens a feeling of implicit and joyous anticipation she missed for a long, long time. Clearly, she felt renewed, that all things were possible. Alice used her awareness of a potential audience to shake up her generative, critical, and expressive capabilities simultaneously, extending psychological growth through writing.

Early in his journal, Jimmy writes about the anxiety of a more immediate concern, the oral interview.

> "I had doubts about whether I will be able to do the oral interview effectively. This is not an easy task for me. I'm afraid that I won't get the kind of response that I want from my subject."

Elizabeth writes that she too had doubts.

> "I felt tired at first. I wanted this paper to be good. I had hoped for a future in writing. I had a hard time with one little interview at first. Now, however, after going through this experience, I feel more confident about the future."

Elizabeth and Jimmy gave each other advice and encouragement to overcome internal anxieties and concerns. They looked inward and to each other, drawing upon each others' support.

Together they gained new perspectives on how to handle the oral interview, a collaboration between two writers who construct a fresh, single point of view.

Tommy remembers how he came to internalize, project and design the interview strategies

> "I ask my peers if they are having trouble getting stated on their interview. From all reports they are not having much trouble. So, I guess it is just me. My problem is I have too many other things on my mind. I need to relax and take one day at a time, stop worrying about the whole picture."

Larry recognized early that everyone has problems, yet together no problem is so large that it cannot be overcome.

> "I feel great because I have a common problem with my classmates. Together we can work it out. I could not have handled this load by myself."

Here, Larry uses a gut response and a good use of strong feeling to evoke a strategy statement. His subsequent interview and written narrative attests to an execution of strategy, and a way of grasping ownership.

Denise and Bart wrote about others reading their compositions. They were not ready for criticism. Denise did not want to rewrite her paper.

> "Writing is such a trauma. Write, criticize, rewrite, etc. It really seems like more work than it's worth. I don't want to write anymore. Give me a science experiment or math problem any day. At least with them one knows when they have finished, and usually if it's right."

Bart's pain increased as the editing process continued.

> "Today, I received some constructive criticism; however, while watching him dissect my paper, I felt much pain. As he wrote, the pain increased.

> As I evaluate this, I realize that to be criticized is painful, but necessary."

These feelings spring from the writing knowledge each originally brought to class. Yet, the criticism changed their perspective on writing. At first, they thought writing was an exclusive process. They came to know that easy writing may not be worthwhile. In the end, they realized effective writing is hard work and requires more effort than ineffective writers are willing to put forth.

In producing a book, these students simultaneously analyzed their writing process and their roles in it as a possible model for their future teaching. Hillary reflects:

> "If we can make writing more interesting for children through different projects like this one, they will learn to write with understanding because of the desire to know a little more."

What these students did in the workshop led to them seizing ownership of their writing. Individual writers became individual owners of their writing. Each written narrative then became an incentive for both educational change and a channel for personal change. These students further found that literacy learning and feeling better about themselves rises to a higher level when individual knowledge become shared knowledge. The learning then became community knowledge with nontransferable ownership. In the end, a new writing perspective emerged for these students.

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